THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray, Say... "The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory are Yours Now and Forever."

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Resurrection means that God stands at the boundary of our existence, and if God is there it is also true that our lives are encompassed, determined, governed, and at last gathered up by God. This means that no one lives or dies apart from God, that all of us count with God, and that God is not content to leave us estranged from himself in life or in death. In that assurance, the assurance of the resurrection - we can live and die, we can lay our beloved dead away, and we can face the future with a measure of confidence and courage.

John B. Rogers, Jr.
We Who Must Die Demand a Miracle

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WHEN YOU PRAY SAY,
THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY BE YOURS
NOW AND FOREVER

Luke 24:1-12

Dear God, we have come here today because we always go to church on Easter – and the music is glorious and the flowers are beautiful and we're with our friends and dearest ones. But, O God, there is more to it than that. We're here because we're hungry and thirsty. We're here because we need to hear again the news that death is not what it seems: that death has been defeated: that love carries this day. So speak your word to us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

In the heart of Buenos Aires, there is a large and beautiful public square called the Plaza de Mayo. At the end of the huge square is the Pink House, the seat of the Argentinean Government, the symbol of Argentinean sovereignty. Twenty years ago a drama began to unfold at the Plaza de Mayo which I was privileged to hear about personally when I had the great honor, representing our church, to meet with the people involved.

The story begins in 1976 when the military dictatorship which was then in charge decided to clamp down on public dissent, criticism of the government, any activity the government found threatening or even disturbing. And so, labor leaders began to be arrested and professors and politicians. And then pretty soon students who had been heard speaking critically of the government, or seen by government intelligence agents attending a political rally, or a meeting to discuss human rights. A few at first, then hundreds, then thousands – law school students, medical school students, college students, high school students. The government, when asked by foreign reporters, claimed that it was waging war against a communist conspiracy and doing, regrettably, what it had to do to protect Argentinean stability and freedom.

The trouble was that the people who had been arrested, mostly at night – without warning the police would simply barge into a home and arrest the husband or young men or young women and take them in for questioning – the trouble was they never came back. The government was very evasive – more questioning – they've been moved to another prison. Their parents began to suspect the worst, which, by the way, turned out to be true. The government, we now know, killed between 20,000 and 30,000 of its own citizens, many of them students, children.

And so some mothers of the disappeared children found one another and began to meet. And in their grief and profound anger they came up with a plan. They would have a kind of demonstration to call attention to what had happened to their children. They picked the most prominent place in Buenos Aires, the Plaza de Mayo, and once a week on Thursday afternoon, they agreed to meet, and to wear small white bandannas on their heads that resemble diapers, and they agreed to simply walk in a circle for a while and if anyone asked what they were doing, they would say simply, "We want to know what happened to our children." No civil disobedience, no fire bombs or even provocative signs – just a small group of middle-aged women, wearing white bandannas, walking in a circle.

Well, the government took a very dim view of this activity. And troops were dispatched to disperse the demonstration. They arrived in armed personnel carriers, with large caliber guns mounted on top. They emerged from their combat vehicles fully equipped, weapons drawn, and surrounded the little group of mothers. The

officer in charge ordered the mothers to disperse. They kept walking – silently. A large crowd gathered. The officer repeated his order – the mothers kept walking. Tension mounted – the young Argentinean soldiers were nervous. The officer ordered his men to do whatever was necessary to disperse the mothers. And as the soldiers approached them, one woman dropped to her knees and began to pray the Lord's Prayer. And then they all did – a circle of mothers praying the Lord's Prayer, and someone in that troop of soldiers essentially surrendered, backed off, and the officer of the day ordered them back into the armored personnel carriers and they went back to their barracks.

That may have been the day when the military dictatorship in Argentina was dealt a powerful and ultimately fatal blow – when a dozen or so women dropped to their knees and prayed a 2,000 year old Jewish prayer that a young rabbi taught his disciples…

> "Father in heaven
> hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come,
> Your will be done.
> Give us our daily bread.
> Forgive our sins.
> Save us from the time of trial
> and deliver us from evil….
> For the kingdom, the power and
> the glory are yours
> now and forever."

The kingdom is yours, O God – not the dictatorship's.

The power is yours, O God – not the militia's.

The glory is yours – today, here, as we kneel, surrounded by the best and strongest and most arrogant authority human beings can assemble – here – the glory is yours, now and forever.

Whatever possessed them to do that? What possesses human beings to walk courageously into the valley of the shadow of death, whatever it is? Whatever possesses people of faith down through the ages to summon extraordinary courage and put their lives, their safety, their security on the line? The answer has something to do with this day, ~~this Easter morning~~. The answer has something to do with the central proclamation of Christian faith… our fundamental belief

> "He is not here. He is risen."
>
> "The kingdom, and the power, and the glory are yours…now and forever."

Peter Gomes, the eloquent preacher to the University at Harvard, playfully asks why all these people show up in church on Easter. The classic academic answers, says Gomes, include the following:

- Rank superstition and primitive fear
- Social habit
- Lack of imagination – people don't know what else to do on Easter morning.
- An insurance policy against the possibility that there is a hell and they may be going to it.

Clergy, on the other hand, are terribly conflicted. We live for a day like this. Every year, even though we know better, we think you've come to hear us. We can't help ourselves. We think we're the reason you're here. The conflict comes because we know we're not up to the job this morning. None of us can put Easter into a sermon. Every one of us secretly wants to turn it over to the organist and choir: three traditional Easter hymns, read the Bible, take the offering, the Hallelujah Chorus and brunch. It's our secret – we don't know how to say it today.

So sometimes the preacher gets cranky and scolds the people for coming just on Easter and wishes everybody a happy Mothers' Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Halloween and Thanksgiving – because, ha ha, we won't see you until Christmas. Not me. I agree with a friend of mine, Bill Carl, who is pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Dallas, and a teacher of preachers, who says we ought to congratulate you for picking the right Sunday to be here.

When Peter Gomes returns to the serious inquiry as to why, in these utterly secular days when there are literally no more social, political and economic reasons for being here rather than at brunch somewhere or enjoying a walk on the lakefront, he says something true, I think not only for you but for the preacher too.

> "People seek out those places both deep and thin where they have reason to believe that they will be satisfied. When you are hungry you go to a restaurant. When you are thirsty you seek out water. People are hungry and thirsty, and somewhere in the recesses of their spiritual subconscious they have heard or remember that you can expect to be filled in church." [Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, p. 332-3]

We are here, that is to say, because we have heard – we have prayed – and in some way, deep inside each one of us, we want to claim as our own, our anchor, our rock, our hope, the familiar words:

> "The kingdom, the power and the
> glory are yours, now and forever."

Easter words. Resurrection words.

Easter is the reason those words are in the Lord's Prayer. Neither of the New Testament versions of the Lord's Prayer contain them. Both Matthew and Luke report that when his disciples asked him to teach them to pray and he did so by teaching words we know as his prayer – he ended with – "save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil."

It was the early Christian church that added a wonderful doxology to the prayer. And it did so because it experienced something that had not happened yet when Jesus taught the prayer. The church lived with resurrection – this side of Easter. They couldn't stop the prayer with "deliver us from evil" because they knew that's what had happened at Easter. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was for them the assurance that no matter what happened to them, they were safe ultimately, in him they had been delivered from evil.

They reached deep into Hebrew scriptures to get just the right phrase. The words are King David's at the very end of his life as he's trying to make sure the leaders of Israel will complete the task of building the temple, and investing authority in his successor, Solomon, his son and, of course, preparing for his own death. And David says:

> "Blessed are you, O Lord...forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty.... Yours is the kingdom." [I Chronicles 29:10-11]

And so, at the very time they were threatened by the power of the state, at the very moment they were being arrested, tortured, thrown to the lions or burned at the stake – at the moment of their greatest vulnerability and weakness – they added the words,

"Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory."

They are Easter words.

If ever there was an event that documented the power of evil and the weakness of human love, and the blunt reality that real power and real glory and real authority are in the hands of other agencies – the government, big business, big human institutions – it was the public execution of Jesus of Nazareth. If ever there was historical proof of the ultimate power of death and the helplessness of life, it was the arrest, torture, public humiliation and crucifixion of this good man.

Can you imagine the devastation of that little group of people who had followed him for three years: men and women who had come to believe that he was the very truth of God, the very love of God, the being of God in their midst; they had actually entertained the notion that somehow he was God, and that being near him, following him and working with him was worth everything they had and everything they were? Can you imagine the devastation in that little room where they had been hiding since the unspeakable horror of Friday afternoon? Apparently he was not God's truth and God's love: just a well-meaning teacher, now a dead martyr. So much for forgiveness and mercy as operating principles. So much for justice and hope and compassion and inclusive love and grace. Reality is this – the ultimate finality of death.

It is in that devastated mood that a few of the women summon the courage to go to the tomb to anoint the body. They do not go anticipating a resurrection. They go worrying about how they're going to remove the stone from the entrance to the tomb.

When they find the tomb open and empty they are perplexed. Two men appear and ask why they seek the living among the dead and they tell the now terrified women, "He is risen."

When the women tell the story to the others still hiding in that room, Luke reports with restraint, "these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them."

What happened exactly? No one knows. No one saw anything. But one thing we do know: that small group of devastated, frightened to death men and women became convinced that he was alive and not only experienced his presence but were so transformed that they emerged from that room absolutely fearless, totally committed to him, ready to live for him and if necessary, die for him.

"Deliver us from evil" they had been praying all night long – but now they prayed, sang, shouted –

"The kingdom, the power, the glory are yours forever."

We need that word. We hunger and thirst for it.

In our work and our struggle for causes we care about; in the responsibility of perhaps just staying with our jobs, or with our precious relationships, just doing what we do, day in and day out, year in and year out, we need that word… "The kingdom, the power and glory are yours." And in our hope for the world; in our hope for a better society, a more just society, a safer, healthier society for our children, a world in which little children are not

abused or shot by their school mates, a world in which all of God's children are respected and included, you and I need to know that the kingdom and power and glory are God's forever. As we feel the temptation to withdraw from the struggle because the world has become too violent, the culture too vulgar, the political system too corrupt, the forces of greed and violence too influential – just when we've about sold out to cynicism and the allure of retreat – we need the Easter promise that death did not defeat him, that love and justice and compassion, the kingdom, the power and the glory, are God's forever, and that therefore our hoping and struggling and praying and working are worth it.

"At the limits of human possibility, God is not finished yet" is the way someone put it.

That's what the resurrection means and that is the food for which we hunger and the drink for which we thirst.

The final limit to human existence is, of course, death – the death of Jesus, the death of our dear ones, our own death, the power of death.

The late Henri Nouwen, not long before he died, wrote a remarkable little book, *Our Greatest Gift, a Meditation on Dying and Caring,* in which he relates a story which illustrates what it means to know that Jesus Christ is risen, that death is no longer a threat and that in Christ you and I can entrust the death of our dear ones and our own death to God. Nouwen tells about going to a circus in Germany and becoming utterly captivated by the trapeze artists, The Flying Rodleighs. He returned to see them several times, finally phoned them and after a very pleasant conversation, they became good friends. Nouwen attended their practices, even traveled with them for a week and he reports a conversation he had with Rodleigh, the leader – the "flyer." He explained"

> "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I am the star – but the real star is Joe, my catcher."
>
> "How does it work?" Nouwen asked.
>
> "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing I can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him."
>
> Nouwen concluded that dying in Christ is trusting in the catcher. [p. 66-67]

That is the word you and I need. It is the food for which I hunger and the drink for which I thirst. It is the word we come to hear on Easter morning. It is the truth we celebrate and the promise we claim every Sunday when we pray,

> "The kingdom, the power and the glory are yours forever."

When the women returned to the room in which the others were hiding and told them what they had seen, the others did not believe them; their words seemed like an idle tale. And so just as words failed those first men and women who experienced the resurrection, so you and I finally turn to the music, the art, the poetry.

Anne Porter wrote a poem about wanting to show some of her work to a dear friend who had just died.

> "These are the poems I'd show you
> But you're no longer alive

The cables creaked and shook
Lowering the heavy box.
The rented artificial grass
Still left exposed
That gritty gash of earth
Yellow and mixed with stones
Taking your body
That never in this world
Will we see again, or touch.

We know little
We can tell less
But one thing I know
One thing I can tell
I will see you again in Jerusalem
Which is of such beauty
No matter what country you come from
You will be more at home there
Than ever with father or mother
Than even with lover or friend
And once we're within her borders
Death will hunt us in vain.
[Anne Porter, *An Altogether Different Language, poems 1934-1994*, "Four Poems in One," p. 45-46]

"The kingdom – the power – the glory – are yours forever."

"For he is not here. He is risen."

He is risen, indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.